

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE BRIEFER: COLONEL DONALD BACON, CHIEF OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ SUBJECT: SUICIDE BOMBERS MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 1:00 P.M. EDT DATE: MONDAY, MARCH 17, 2008

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MR. HOLT: All right, Colonel Bacon, we'll go ahead and get started.

And I'd like to welcome you once again to the Bloggers Roundtable, Colonel Donald Bacon, the chief of Special Operations and Intelligence Information, Strategic Communications out of Multi-national Force-Iraq. Thank you, sir, for joining us this afternoon.

COL. BACON: Thank you.

What I'd like to brief you all on today is I think a very important topic, it's about the foreign terrorists that are coming to Iraq. Just yesterday we released findings from an analysis we have done on foreign terrorists that are coming here to Iraq. We debriefed 48 of these foreign terrorists that have come in here in the past year. Tried to analyze their demographics; how they were recruited; how they got to Iraq; what happened once they came here.

And it is an important topic, the main reason being is that even though we will fully state that they're a minority of the al Qaeda terrorists here in Iraq, they're the most dangerous elements. They're the ones who do most of the suicide bombings, so they create most of the horrific, barbaric attacks. And they also form the core of the leadership for al Qaeda in Iraq. So they're -- even though smaller numbers, compared to the Iraqis, they're the most lethal in the leadership elements. So, it's why it's an important topic.

But, let you know what we found with these 48 foreign terrorists that we debriefed and analyzed. Here's the demographics that we were able to put together: Typically, they're single males with the average age of 22 -- in fact, they were all single males out of these 48. Most had zero military experience, unless they came from countries where they had a draft, and then they only did the very minimal service required.

They came from blue-collar occupations -- they had jobs like taxi drivers, construction work, for example. Most had some high school education but not many had a high school degree. They came from lower to middle class family backgrounds. Most came from larger families, and they found it hard to be noticed.

Interestingly enough, most, even though they had a hard time being noticed, also talked about their fathers being harsh and sometimes abusive. But they almost all said they wanted to make their mark within the family. But, as a contradiction, or as a paradox, most did not want to tell their family where they were going out of fear that they would be -- they would be met with disapproval.

Most were religious but were not extremists until they met their recruiter, and then they became extremists with that relationship -- and we'll talk more about that. By and large, they were impressionable, trying to find a way to get accepted and to be part of a team. Most were lonely, and they were identified as such by their recruiter and befriended.

Now, the recruitment itself: They were typically befriended by recruiters, sometimes in the mosque where they attended, or in their work area. In all cases, the recruiter offered friendship, and also offered to teach the -- we'll say the foreign -- the future foreign terrorist, the basics of Islam. Sometimes they would say, hey, you're not praying right, let me teach you how to pray; or the basics of the Quran. And that's how the relationships started.

And after a few weeks they were gradually talking about jihad and going to Iraq. As I mentioned, sometimes the recruiter came from the same mosque -- though very seldom it was the imam, it was normally another worshipper. Sometimes the recruiter met them at work, and noticed that the person was lonely and needed friend, and would invite that person to his mosque -- the recruiter's mosque.

During the recruitment process they would frequently show two types of videos -- normally both, but two kinds. They would show Americans being targeted in these videos -- edited videos of vehicles being blown up or sniper attacks. They would also show heavily-edited videos of Americans abusing the Iraqis. And Abu Ghraib was a popular topic as part of that.

The themes were: al Qaeda is -- in Iraq is defeating the Americans; the Americans are abusing the Iraqis; it is your religious duty to go to Iraq; you can be an avenger for the abused Iraqis; and, you can be part of a winning team. Those were the themes that the recruiters used. Interestingly enough, many of them noted that a lot of the videos were recorded off Al-Jazeera Arabic TV, and those were the videos being showed by the recruiter.

Now, the facilitation into Iraq: All of them came through Iraq -- or came to Iraq through Syria, primarily through the Damascus airport. And sometimes it would take a month, sometimes longer, to get them into Iraq. And, interestingly enough, the facilitators in Syria were not very religious. They were taking the recruiters to -- or the recruits, excuse me, to nightclubs and bars, and basically labeled as "irreligious" by the foreign terrorists that were captured.

Once in Iraq, the recruits reported being treated harshly. The Iraqis were suspicious of foreigners and the recruits felt looked down upon by the Iraqis themselves. They felt that had to hide their foreign identity, otherwise, the Iraqi citizens would turn them in.

The recruits, especially those that were designated to be suicide terrorists were sequestered, normally in rooms by themselves -- very Spartan rooms, given very few amenities. And even some of the fighters and feisty -- the suicide attackers were -- reported some of the same treatment. But the few

amenities and the sequestering was particularly true with the suicide terrorists.

Most of the foreign terrorists said they were under-fed, they felt famished. The Iraqi al Qaeda in Iraq, they said, also treated them harshly, it wasn't just the citizens. They felt like there was a division between the Iraqis and the foreign terrorists that were there.

They came to Iraq expecting to see Americans get killed. And this was a key point, this is the overwhelming point from the 48: They came to Iraq expecting to see Americans get killed, and yet what they primarily saw were Iraqis getting killed. And it bothered them badly. And some of them were angered too that they were being -- they saw some of their other foreign terrorists being used against infrastructure targets and not against Americans either. But this -- so this bothered them a lot. They did not come to kill Iraqis. They also came expecting to see al Qaeda being victorious, but instead they saw a different reality of al Qaeda being targeted, and their having to hide. And they just felt like the reality did not match the expectation that they had when they got here.

Eventually, they felt discouraged and they wanted out. And, however, all of them had their passports taken and had their money taken. So they felt hopeless in finding a way to get -- to get out.

Now, some of them did sign up early on to be suicide terrorists, but some of them said they were pressured into being suicide terrorists when they came here. They came here under the assumption they would be a fighter, but once they got here -- in fact, it was more than some, it was the majority were then pressured into being suicide terrorists.

Not all had volunteered for that. This was the kind of things that they were told, if they came here thinking they were going to be a fighter, but they were being pressured to be a suicide bomber.

It would be: This is your duty; this is what we need you to do for the jihad; you can be more useful as being suicide -- a suicide bomber than you could be a fighter; you'll be a martyr, and, this is what we need you to do to win. And almost all of them said they went into a kind of survival mode after a few weeks of being in Iraq.

So -- a summary: To a person that came with the ideas of fighting Americans but eventually wanted out, most felt relief when they were captured, and even some cried during their initial discussions as -- out of relief of being captured, instead of not getting killed like they expected. And it's ironic that they came to kill Americans, and eventually they felt relieved to be captured by the Americans.

Some more background: At the peak, we had 120 foreign terrorists coming into Iraq each month -- this was back in May and June timeframe of last year. Right now we're down to 40 to 50 foreign terrorists coming in a month. A couple different factors for that, and if you want, we can talk about that later.

Rough breakout: Approximately 41 percent of the foreign terrorists are now coming from North Africa, that's higher than what it was about a year ago. There's about 40 percent coming from Saudi Arabia, and then I can breakout the smaller numbers if you would like later.

Fifty percent of the foreign terrorists eventually become suicide bombers, we got that from mainly from the Sinjar Papers -- and if you want to know more about that, I can tell you about that later as well. And we think, roughly, 90 percent of all the suicide bombers are foreign terrorists.

The foreign terrorist fighters do produce the most destructive actions of al Qaeda and cause the most civilian casualties. That's why this is an important topic. And with that, I'd be glad to take your questions.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir, thank you very much.

Spencer.

Q I got so many. This is tremendously informative, and thank you so much, Colonel. COL. BACON: You're welcome.

Q If it's all right to ask -- like, a kind of multi-parter: First, just as a basic percentage, what percent of the insurgency do you now believe is -- and I use insurgency loosely -- do you now believe is al Qaeda? And what percent of al Qaeda do you believe is foreign?

On a kind of broader question, does it seem to you, from this, you know, cohort of captives, that these are evil people, or people who have been more or less, to use the term sort of, loosely "brainwashed" into coming here and doing these sorts of actions? And then -- and then finally, you know, you said that they were relieved to be captured, are these people who would -- if you believe the U.S. pulls out, follow us home and attack us in the United States?

COL. BACON: Okay, so there's a three-fold question there (laughs) -- and some hypothetical, but I'll give it my shot.

Q Yes.

COL. BACON: You're saying, what's the percentage of Iraqi versus foreign --

Q Yeah.

COL. BACON: -- if I'm catching you right?

Q Iraqi versus al Qaeda; and then foreign within the AQI.

COL. BACON: Okay, I'd like to answer that with sort of a two-fold answer. First of all, we would say that the foreign element of al Qaeda in Iraq are the minority, but they're the most lethal. They're the ones who are doing most of the suicide attacks that do most of the damage.

And having said that, I have seen different numbers -- what it is. I've seen numbers of 5 -- I've seen numbers of 10 percent, some 15 percent, but somewhere in that area, I would guess --

Q And that's the numbers of al Qaeda in the insurgency, or foreigner in al Qaeda?

COL. BACON: Foreigners -- the foreigners in al Qaeda in Iraq.

Q Got it -- AQI, yeah.

COL. BACON: Right. But, you know, I don't think we have a solid number. We know approximately 40 to 50 are coming in a month. And so that's -- gives us a chance to, sort of, gage a little bit, those numbers. And we think about half end up being suicide terrorists. So, over time, you can sort of analyze what the -- what the leftover would be. And, of course, it was a lot higher this last summer. So there's some remnants there.

Q Right.

COL. BACON: Currently, we have approximately 240, total, in custody. And that's in the American custody. The Iraqis have probably just as much if not more.

Now, you're talking about the individuals themselves? I have no doubt some are more ideological than others, but the impression I have from the debriefing of these 48, they were more of young 22-year-olds -- and, of course, that varied a little bit, but that was the average, that were looking for friendship, looking for a place to be respected and counted. And that seemed to be more of the driving force than anything that I got from the debriefers on this.

I have no doubt there are some ideologues. They are the more ideologue members of al Qaeda in Iraq. We have found a lot of Iraqis in al Qaeda -- I'm not saying all of them, but I would say a good number of them are also driven by economic reasons. You know, al- Qaeda in Iraq will pay one two or three hundred dollars to plant a bomb. You get that more from the Iraqi side than you would these foreign terrorists who are in, who are in it more for the ideology.

But, you know, I think it's a nuanced answer because, obviously, when you -- when we talked to these young guys, you know, they weren't that ideological until they met the recruiter. And it was more about the friendship, and the being -- finding a place and being respected, was more the motivator. So a little bit of a mixed answer for you there, but --

Q Sure.

COL. BACON: -- that's the best I can understand it.

Some of these, where would they go if they didn't come to Iraq? I think we see evidence of them not only going to Iraq. And so they're -- I think the majority are coming to Iraq, but there are some being sent to other places. And that's what we understand from some of these debriefings, so --

Q Could you say a little bit more about that?

COL. BACON: I think you could -- well, --

Q Like, what other places?

COL. BACON: Well, I would say there's -- you know, with our operations in Afghanistan, and Pakistan, also in the Levant, and so I think -- what I'm telling you is that there would be some being sent other places if they weren't coming here. And we're seeing some evidence of that anyway. Clearly, the majority are coming here right now -- the way it appears to us.

Q That sounds a little different than saying that, like, they would come to the United States.

COL. BACON: Well, I don't know, I would think that some -- you know, of course, this is a hypothetical, I think some could if they -- clearly, al-Qaeda in Iraq would like to see that -- or not Iraq, al Qaeda, writ large, would try to do that if there was -- if they found a way to do it, in my opinion.

So, I think it's possible that some could, or would.

Q Thank you so much.

COL. BACON: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin from The Military Observer, ON Point. Thank you for taking the time tonight, sir.

COL. BACON: You're welcome.

Q Colonel, I have a bit of a -- kind of a two-part question, I guess like Spencer did. With the way you describe the suicide bombers coming in -- 22, unemployed, you know, poor, not a great -- not a great family situation.

That describes half the Middle East. Is this something you can stop? And is this also the same demographics that you're starting to see with the Taliban and people coming out of -- coming out of Pakistan going into Afghanistan now?

COL. BACON: Well, I think you have raised a good point, that there is a large demographic of -- from this pool to go from, and that is a concern. I think one of the things we need to counter is to undercut the ideology itself. And I think we're starting to see some impact of that with Islamic leaders from Saudi Arabia, some from Egypt that are starting to come out strong against Osama bin Laden and this ideology.

But, clearly, the demographic pool is large and that is a concern.

Q Is there any --

COL. BACON: I'm not sure if I understood your second part of your question, but --

Q Well, I mean, when I was up at Afghanistan what I saw was the Taliban who were coming across. It seems to me -- you're there more than me, it seems to be the same demographics -- early 20s, late teens, you know, a higher religious education than a secular education; very poor and very -- really, nothing else to live for. And if that's the same demographic coming out of Pakistan, how is it stoppable?

COL. BACON: Well, the demographic itself is a problem, I would acknowledge that. But I think we can counter this ideology, and also advertise what they're doing here. You know, they are killing a lot of innocent people through car bombs; you know, they're beheading people; we're finding torture houses.

I think we're trying to do a better job at showing what the impact and the effect of al Qaeda in Iraq, and hopefully undercut the image or the vision that they have prior to coming here. So, there's -- but, that demographic issue, you're right, there is a large demographic of these kinds of folks available.

Q Well, since -- (audio difficulty) -- is pretty much distrusted or doesn't speak good Arabic, are the different TV stations in Baghdad, are they covering this and describing how they're killing the -- killing their own citizens? Is that's what turned them against it?

COL. BACON: Well, I think we're starting to see more of that. I think if you look at polling -- not only in Iraq but also in the pan- Arab world, I think we're seeing a decrease in support for the al Qaeda ideology. And I think part of it is, is the indiscriminate car bombings.

And not only that, I mean, we have al Qaeda videos we've captured where they're burning people alive; they're beheading people; they're -- we've got, we just found another torture house last week. And I will tell you that's the sixth or seventh one since I've been here.

And I think we've got to -- it's not spinning it or anything, it's just showing the reality, this is what these guys are doing. And I think if we can do that, and the Iraqis -- it was in Iraqi media, the list of torture houses recently. It was an Iraqi who wrote it, in fact.

So I think we're getting -- we're starting to see more truthfulness being reported on what the al Qaeda's doing, and I think that's part of the answer. Because I don't think that's what people are signing up to do.

Q All right, thank you.

COL. BACON: I think it would undercut the recruiting effort if we continue to show what al-Qaeda in Iraq's doing.

MR. HOLT: Okay, F.B.L.?

Q Hi, this is F.B.L. with Donovan.com.

I have, again, a -- kind of, two-part question. You talked about it a little bit just a moment ago, but are there concerted efforts to get the message of the debriefing that you've done with these 48 out to the Iraqis? Or is the kind of things that you found, such as that it's mostly foreigners, something that is widely known from Iraqi's own experience?

And, these recruiters, are they unique to Iraq? Are they coming -- you know, specifically, we're going to send people to Iraq? Or are they part of the larger AQ pool, rather than just AQI?

COL. BACON: I think they are part of a larger AQ network, but most of them are tailoring to getting folks into Iraq. These recruiters are in North Africa, in a lot of the pan-Arab countries and cities. And we have a pretty good breakout from the operation we did last September where we captured a -- all the documents from an al Qaeda cell that would take people from Syria and get them into Iraq. And it was -- and you, I don't know, some of you all may have heard of it, it's the Sinjar Operation, or otherwise known as the Muthanna

Papers -- and we captured over 900 biographies that these -- the al Qaeda cell there took a very detailed list of all the al Qaeda that crossed the border -- or the foreign terrorists, where they were from; what cities; their route of travel; how much money they had on their person when they came in -- basically, how much money they took off of them; and lots of personal identity details.

And from that -- getting a list of 900 bios, we were able to refine our assessment of that, but we learned a lot. There was a large -- there is a large networking, or network, out there bringing these folks in. And it could be shifted very easily to wherever al Qaeda needs them, but right now Iraq is where most are needed.

And it's a -- a lot of it's financial driven. It's a -- a lot of the recruiters operate on getting money from being able to recruit people. The networks in Syria are getting money. So, a lot of it is economic incentive. So, I think that answers part of your question. What else do I need to answer on that, I'm sorry?

Q That was -- that was pretty much it. Just wondering what the connections were to -- of AQI recruiters to the wider al Qaeda network?

COL. BACON: I think it's primarily tailored to Iraq, but it could be easily refueled. And we see a little bit of evidence of that. But right now this is where the higher need is at, in Iraq. And I know -- we know that al Qaeda in Iraq wants more foreign terrorists, not less. And we see they're asking for more foreign terrorists because that's -- a lot of their destructive operations come from these folks.

Q And one --

COL. BACON: And we put the flow down by over half, so they're hurting -- their pool is being reduced, so they're wanting to increase that pool. I'm sorry, go ahead.

Q If I could just ask one more. You said that you maybe wanted to talk about the factors that have reduced that pool. And how have the percentages of foreign, versus native suicide bombers shifted in the last three years?

COL. BACON: We are seeing multiple factors for this reduction. First of all, we're working hard on the border to tackle the Iraqi side of the networks that get them from Syria in. So we took the most important network down last September. And it tried to reconstitute, and we have also captured that new leader that was trying to restructure that network -- or reconstitute that network.

So, that's a part of it. Plus, we have tagged a lot of the facilitators in Mosul, and Baghdad and in the Tigris River Valley that were helping move these guys, so we've gone after those folks. That's -- that's one part of it.

Two, the source countries are working hard, particularly Saudi Arabia, to reduce the flow out. They're -- as mentioned, their -- some of their top religious leaders are speaking against al Qaeda, and some of them are talking to the youth: But, don't go to Iraq; don't give your money to these folks; this is -- I'm paraphrasing, it's not a righteous cause.



We're seeing that in some of the other countries too. We're working with a lot of the -- through the embassies and various network -- or various of our authorities to work with the host countries to help. We know Syria is taking some actions as well to limit -- when they identify someone who's a foreign terrorist, or fits that demographic, or when they come into the Damascus airport -- turning them back around or arresting them.

So, there's been a combination of efforts there that have helped reduce this flow. I think part of it is, too, that if they're watching the news closely they're seeing that we've had more success since the surge. And I'm sure that that could stymie some of the incentive. But I think it's not one answer, it's a -- it's a cumulative effect of all of these.

Q Thank you.

COL. BACON: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Megan.

Q Hi, this is Megan from [FreedomWatch.org](http://FreedomWatch.org). Do you mind going into more detail -- what, if any, type of information operations are going on inside Iraq to combat these foreign terrorists? And, are there any information operations that you can speak of in neighboring Arab countries, particularly Syria and Saudi Arabia, since that seems where most of them are coming from or through?

COL. BACON: Well, you know, I don't work on the Information Operations side of the house, though I know folks that work that. I do work on the Public Affairs side, and I will tell you that we debriefed a lot of the Iraqi Press on this yesterday, so they were given the full briefing yesterday. And we're starting to see a couple articles come out.

We are also -- I work with the -- we work with also with the pan- Arab media to give them this information as well. And so we're -- we're doing a little better in the -- in the public affairs side in getting this stuff out there and briefing the Iraqi and pan-Arab media.

And more in the official side of things, we are giving this information to the governments who have a lot of these folks coming out from North Africa, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and so forth. And we have various relationships, we're -- we're (reeling ?) this data and helping them formulate a policy as well.

And on the IO side, I can't address -- I'm not part of the IO team there, but I know they're busy.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anybody -- somebody else joined us late -- anybody else there?

Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred, go ahead.

Q Yes, sir, if you could talk a little bit about to the extent we've demolished the networks bringing them in from Ramadi, or Falluja, or Haditha? And now that they've moved north to Mosul, are we able to kind of track the movement of where they're trying to penetrate through so that we

can kind of stop them at the border and reduce that from 150 down to 50 down to 10?

COL. BACON: Well, you are right that the -- prior to last year, prior to the Anbar "Awakening," most of the flow came south -- the southern half of the Iraqi-Syrian border, and then part of Anbar. But because of a 90 -- a 90 percent decrease in violence and a inhospitable area now for al Qaeda, they shifted most of that facilitation to the northern half of the Syrian-Iraqi border in the Sinjar area, particularly.

And there was an emir -- an al Qaeda emir that was in charge of getting them across the border and into the "the right lanes," if you will, to go where they needed to be used. And we have degraded that particular network by -- in one operation we killed the emir and a lot of his key guys in his organization. They tried replacing him, we captured that guy. So, we've degraded that, but they are a resilient organization and they have various other networks that will stand up. And so it's a continuous process right now.

And we've also gone after a lot of the key foreign terrorist facilitators in Mosul. One of them was a guy named by (sic) Jar Allah, and we -- and I wish I could remember the date, I want to think it's the 21st of February, he was killed in an operation, and he was in charge of the foreign terrorists in Mosul -- in East Mosul, particular. He had a whole cell.

So, I will tell you, we are working this hard. I think we've got more work to do. It's not going to be an overnight thing. I think we've got to keep chipping away at these networks and keep lowering the -- keep lowering the violence levels one step -- one chip at a time, if you will.

I think a big part of this is is we've got to keep working the security end of it, but ultimately we need to get the economic situation better, where we're lowering the unemployment and getting the Iraqis -- where their work, as part of this violence is fed by the unemployment. So that's a -- I think what we've got to do is keep working the security but, ultimately, working the economics and the political side will help us continue driving down the violence numbers. So, I mean, that's sort of the grand strategy here.

But getting back to the foreign terrorists facilitation, we've got to keep chipping away at it. It won't be an overnight thing.

Q Just a quick follow-up to pinpoint the question more so, is basically, has the leadership moved over to Mosul -- as far as bringing them, whereas if we take them out in Mosul we're basically bagging two for one at this point because -- or, are they still being conducted from other places where it really doesn't matter what we do in Mosul? COL. BACON: Well, Mosul is a key, we think. And it won't be an overnight -- like turning on a light switch, taking out those guys down there. But we've had some success. We've -- and this is now about 10-days-old data, but we have captured or killed 142 al Qaeda in Iraq in Mosul since January. So, we are working Mosul hard.

But that is the key junction, if you will, for the foreign terrorists coming in from Syria. Most of them go through Mosul, and either used in Mosul or they get funneled through the Tigris River Valley south into Salahuddin, or into Baghdad, or in the Diyala area. But Mosul is a key node. In fact, a quote I heard my bosses state -- and I think it's a good quote, you know, "To win they need Baghdad, but to survive they've got to keep Mosul." And that's one of the reasons it is a key junction for the foreign terrorists.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And, as we're running a little short of time here, do you have any final thoughts or final comments for us?

COL. BACON: Well, I think this is an important topic, because this is a big part of the violence here. And we've got to keep working the foreign terrorists networks, as mentioned by some of the questions that we're doing that.

So, thank you for your time.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Colonel Donald J. Bacon, he's the chief of Special Operations and Intelligence Information from the Strategic Communications, Multi- National Force-Iraq. Thank you, sir, for joining us and we look forward to hearing from you again.

COL. BACON: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

COL. BACON: Bye-bye.

END.